

Literature Needs to Bring about Another Copernican Revolution

By Can Xue

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Of course, there are realistic shadows in these stories and novels because all the materials come from our reality. But they have been turned into other meaning through my processing in my “vacuum workshop.” My writing is not a transformation of narrative technique. It tells the stories of the ontology of literature from the beginning. Its logic has no concern with the logic people use in everyday life. But the logic some readers use in their worldly life becomes a very stubborn framework in their mind when they are reading because they are quite convinced that their logic is time-tested. So this sort of logic covers the deeper logic in the works and induces obstructions when they are reading. My logic belongs to an a priori ability in my soul—a direct-viewing.

I do not tell plane stories; I tell stereoscopic stories. We need another way and conception, a revolutionary way and conception, to understand this kind of stories. Some critics and readers, both domestic and abroad, don't have this way and conception. So they apply an “improved way” to the works. They say that in the stories by Can Xue a new narrative technique has been used. This technique breaks up the foundation of narration in our fiction, and it also turns the structure of time and space in fiction upside down. So the way is a way toward freedom. It seems that this is a convincing argument. But I think that view is still a “post-modernist” one. And the foothold here is not from the aesthetic conception of modernist literature. My view is that a purely aesthetic reading should be like this: One shouldn't read a work as an objective thing, and read a narration as an attribute of one's psychology, and take time and space as objective attribute of a work. On the contrary, when we are reading, we should regard a work as a medium that can start the a priori ability—an ability for prior direct-viewing in our soul. We use the work to stimulate that ability, and let the structure of time and space in our heart appear. Then we use the direct-viewing to watch the beautiful scenery in the work that belongs to oneself at last.

There is a premise here: You can't regard a work as a purely objective thing, a thing which belongs to psychological attribute, and which we can study scientifically. This kind of reading seems effective, but in the end it doesn't come to a consistent point of view. Then what is aesthetic feeling? In my view, aesthetic feeling is a subjective thing. It's a sympathetic response between people. There is an a priori structure in this sympathetic response. And the structure belongs to our ability for direct-viewing given by Nature. Although the structure exists a priori in our soul, it must realize itself by combining itself with emotion in works. Every reader of modernist literature, if the reader is qualified, must do what Copernicus did in his time, which is turn one's direction of thinking around by looking for the structure of time and space in one's soul when you are reading a work. Only in this way can you enter into the work and grasp the structure.

So a modernist reading is to read one's own ego, to activate the direct-viewing of time and space in oneself, so that the reader can see what the structure looks like. Of course, this is achieved by stimulation of works of art and literature. The usual way of reading is to regard narrative as an attribute of the psychology of a writer, and a direct-viewing of time and space as an attribute of a work. This kind of reading can never successfully enter into modernist literature.

Many readers who interpret the riddle of Can Xue's work as a "strange technique" of narration say: Can Xue always breaks up the circumscription of ego, makes the ego strange, splits the ego into an id and an old ego, and enters into a free kingdom of dreams. And she even breaks and turns upside down the continuity of structure of time and space in a work, thereby ignoring the existence of the objective world completely! But I don't think this interpretation can stand on its own ground. And this way of reading is still mechanical and rigid.

If you read these works carefully, you will find that you can't interpret the works as a transformation of narrative technique. Layers of psychology are of no concern in the works either. It's not that Can Xue uses a strange technique for her writing. What she does is a special kind of creation, a creation that is purely a spiritual movement, a "zero" movement that can engender "existence." So everything is new in this kind of work. But since some readers are not familiar with the rules of the creation, they think they grasp essence when they find some strange places here and there in the works. But usually essence is not in those places. It is in your mind. Self-reflection is the most important act. As for the text you are reading, the most distant and strange essence often hides inside the very elements of the work that we think we understand and can easily grasp. Meanwhile, readers always deny those elements from a point of view that is mechanical.

As for dreams, although people overcome the circumscriptions of ego in their dreams, that's only an attribute of animals at the bottom of one's ego that becomes active. It's not really a freedom. Some readers satisfy themselves with this "freedom." But I don't because what I want to do is to pursue a true freedom of human beings. When one dreams, one is a somewhat passive observer in one's dream. If we regard that kind of passive observation as one's freedom, this sort of freedom would then be too naïve, too empty and weak. You only need some marijuana to reach that "freedom." The freedom of art should be to take adventures on one's own initiative to create contradictory situations, then to push the tension of the contradictions to the utmost for one to experience it. This kind of freedom reflects the noble quality of human beings.

I'm also exploring the structure inside me when I read other writers. The structure of time and space of art is an a priori condition inside one whether one is a writer or a reader. And it is a thing by which one can form one's emotion. It is also a fixed structure inside everyone's soul, although it doesn't activate if you don't explore it. There is only this structure of time and space, no other, in our aesthetic activities. An artist has given the structure to the work when he finishes his work. But a reader has to try hard to let the work excite him repeatedly when he is reading. Only by doing so can the reader find the structure inside himself, and facilitate the structure to be in an agreement with the work—gradually. Often when we start to read, the structure doesn't appear. We can't see it immediately. So we have to "stare" at the work repeatedly. Only by that process will it appear inside our soul—or inside the work. It's the same thing. So as a reader, before your own structure is formed, you have no foundation if you talk about the structure of the work—it's out of inertia if you do it—because the structure does not yet exist. After this "staring," your structure is evoked; then the communication occurs. By that time, the emotional content in an aesthetic object will gradually fit into your structure inside you.